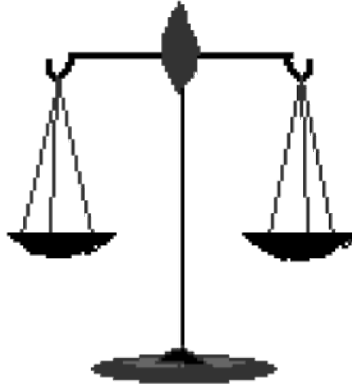


Stress Control

A Self-Help Pack



User's Guide

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Stress Control - a self-help pack

Stress Control is a programme to help you understand stress and cope with it more effectively. The relaxation audio CD and the User's Guide are designed to be used together. To obtain most benefit from the package, it is advisable to read the booklet and complete the questionnaires before listening to the CD.

Stress: What is it?

Stress is a word that seems to be heard everywhere. We are constantly offered articles and books about it, as well as television and radio programmes. In spite of this there seems to be little general understanding about what stress really is and even the experts argue about its exact definition. Most people suffering the effects of stress are unaware of it.

It is useful to think of stress as being a question of *balance* between ourselves and the situations we find ourselves in.

We know when we have achieved the right balance. *We feel at peace with ourselves and others; we feel positive about our achievements and we enjoy life.*

When we do not achieve this balance, however, we become aware of a sense of strain. *We become aware of having to make a greater effort; of feeling less satisfied with our achievements; having doubts about our performance and being unable to enjoy the good things in life.*

We become more inward looking and have less time for things and people outside our main concerns.

*Life becomes more of a struggle and the effort involved in keeping going makes us exhausted. We feel the need to make more and more effort to achieve less and less; we become troubled by mysterious aches and pains which can lead us to believe we are ill, which in turn can lead to extra stress. This can be described as **negative stress***

However, this depressing picture can be redrawn. *The energy expended in negative stress can be channeled into **positive stress**.*

Most of us are more familiar with positive stress than negative stress and therefore we can use the skills we already possess. In order to do this we have to be aware of several things:-

- We need to recognise when we are stressed
- We need to recognise potentially stressful situations.
- We need to remind ourselves of the skills we already have.
- We need to improve on these skills and be able to use them effectively

The Stress Response

During stress extra amounts of energy are liberated. When stress is negative, this energy is used in a way that is counter-productive but this energy *can* be put to constructive and positive use as will be described later.

We can see stress as occurring when *we perceive ourselves as being unable to meet the demands of the situation we find ourselves in, without making a great deal of effort*. Extra energy has to be found to maintain this effort. This is created by our autonomic nervous system through the secretion of adrenalin into the bloodstream and leads to an increase in physical arousal and interference with normal activity.

This mechanism, known as the *flight or fight response*, goes into action when a threat to ourselves is recognised. It produces the familiar physical changes such as a pounding heart and butterflies in the stomach. The flight or fight mechanism has survived from our more primitive past and probably evolved to protect us from physical harm.

We can understand this reaction when faced with a burglar or mugger, or when we narrowly avoid being hit by a passing car *but* if it occurs when we are in the company of people we know or sitting at our desk, in a meeting or shopping with a friend, then it is not so easy to understand.

This is because in today's society it is not threats to our physical self that triggers off this reaction but threats to our psychological self e.g. losing a partner, looking a fool or not being good enough, failing an examination, losing one's job or failing to get promoted, fearing illness or death. Unlike the physical threats we faced in our caveman days when a massive amount of energy was needed to be made available for a short period of time, the psychological threats are of a different nature.

The psychological threats of our more complex and competitive society tend to be more enduring and this energy has to be made available for longer periods than the body was designed to cope with. Consequently they can have debilitating and exhausting effects.

These effects can have long term consequences and effect our mental, physical and emotional well-being, but it is important to remember that
stress and its effect is not abnormal.

Stress can be viewed as a normal process rather like a car that is going too fast because it is in need of some adjustment to its control mechanisms. Although most cars are capable of being driven at 90 plus miles per hour they would soon start having problems if continually driven at that speed. A stressed body is the

equivalent of a car being driven at maximum speed. The ride is less comfortable and reliable and uses up a lot of energy.

What causes negative stress?

There are many causes of stress and some are described in *Table 1*.

One example is when several unpleasant or upsetting events occur at the same time; another is a feeling of not being in control, such as when you lose your job, a close relative dies or you have a sudden illness; some people set high standards for themselves which are often difficult or impossible to meet; others have difficulty expressing what they think or feel - and sometimes stress seems to occur for no obvious reason at all.

Because stress is a matter of balance between external demands and internal judgments of our ability to meet those demands, it means the response can be changed either by changing the external situation or by modifying our response to it, or both.

Stress: The personal element and the vicious circle

When we start to become stressed it can affect our ability to accurately assess the demands being made upon us and our ability to cope with it. We tend to focus on the negative aspects of the situation and ignore the positive. We do this by ignoring our strengths and good points and concentrating on our inadequacies, by over estimating what is required of us or by anticipating dire consequences if we are not successful.

Another way of looking at it is that our thoughts become exaggerated and we view the situation in terms of black and white. At the time we believe that these thoughts are true reflections of the situation, when in fact they are exaggerated assessments of the demands being made upon us and an inadequate assessment of our ability to cope with them.

Recent psychological research has demonstrated that the more stressed we are, the more distorted our thinking becomes. The important thing to remember is that we are not aware of it at the time it occurs.

We may believe for example, that we are not doing a good job when in fact our colleagues are impressed with our performance. In the longer term, however, if this **self-defeating thinking** is not checked, it can affect our performance as we can see from the stories of Margaret and Steven.

Case Study 1 – Margaret

Margaret was married to a young executive who was keen to get on in his firm and had recently been promoted. This entailed a move to a different part of the country where Margaret didn't know anyone and she missed the support of her family and friends.

They were invited to a party where there were people from her husband's firm whom she had not met before. She was keen to make a good impression but after a while started to feel uncomfortable and felt that the other guests were finding her boring. She felt that she was 'saying the wrong thing' and feared that she was going to 'dry up completely'. She felt that her speech was becoming uneven and jerky. Margaret was sure that the other guests were noticing these things and were thinking she was odd or strange. As she became aware of these things her stress increased and she started to think 'what is happening to me'. As she did not understand what was happening, she became even more distressed and wanted to leave the party.

The next time they were invited to a similar event she became anxious just thinking about it and started to feel uncomfortable. This in turn confirmed her fears that she would make a fool of herself and she refused to attend.

Case Study 2 – Steven

Most people find speaking in public or making presentations to colleagues stressful but find ways of coping with it so that, on most occasions, they feel they have done a good job. Steven is an example of what happens when we fail to cope effectively.

Steven was an executive in a small firm and was responsible for the development of new products. He had to make regular presentations on his progress at work. When one of these was due to be made, he would start to worry that he would not make a good impression and that his colleagues would think he was not up to the job.

This fear led to him becoming anxious about the presentation and the belief that he had to do it perfectly, (overestimating the demand). As the time for the presentation became closer he would become aware that his hands felt as if they were shaking and he felt that he was no longer able to think clearly. This in turn confirmed his belief that if he did not make a good presentation and if his colleagues saw his hands shaking and noticed his stilted speech, then they would *definitely* believe (overestimating the negative consequences), that he was 'not up to the job' and his promotion prospects would be affected.

Over a period of time, the stress caused by these presentations proved too much and he started to take sick leave on the days that they were due to take place. As it happened, his prediction about his promotion prospects proved to be

true but not because he was not doing a good job (his colleagues were impressed with his work) but as a result of his taking too much time off.

Notes - Margaret and Steven avoided situations that were once no problem but which had become such an ordeal that they felt unable to face them. This has several different effects. The loss of confidence made them depressed as there were more and more situations they felt unable to face and this in turn confirmed their belief that they were unable to cope with them. Avoiding difficult situations led to an increase in their stress. They became irritable and short-tempered with their partners and friends and felt less able to respond to them positively. Both knew that they were stressed and had become avoiders.

Most of us, however, are not aware of being stressed and we carry on coping. Unlike Margaret and Steven, who were aware they had problems, people who continue coping often develop physical problems such as high blood pressure or digestive problems which they do not associate with their situations at home or work or to a way they are thinking. When stress becomes too much for these people, it is often dramatic and unexpected, as with Malcolm.

Case Study 3 – Malcolm

Malcolm was the head of a Government department. It was generally acknowledged that he was doing a good job. One day he was taking his children Christmas shopping in a large store, when he suddenly felt breathless, his chest was tight and he felt that he couldn't breathe.

He was in a state of collapse and was convinced he was having a heart attack. An ambulance took him to hospital and subsequent investigations showed no evidence of a heart attack or heart disease.

Malcolm could not understand this - after all, he had had all the symptoms. Later he was able to recognise that his symptoms were related to stress. When he looked more closely at the way he was approaching changes at work, he could see he was having self-defeating thoughts.

Notes - Through becoming more assertive, improving his communication skills and using relaxation techniques before meetings, Malcolm was able to reduce his stress levels (and the number of hours spent in preparation). He became more effective and had more time for his family, whom he then realised, he had been neglecting.

Margaret recognised that she was expecting too much from herself. To regain her confidence for social occasions she started meeting people at less formal occasions such as a young wives group. She also found a relaxation technique helpful as it made her feel more in control of herself. When she felt comfortable with other wives, she started to invite one or two back to her house for coffee until she gradually regained her confidence for more formal occasions. After a short while she was able to accompany her husband to social events without stress.

It was difficult for Steven to identify any self-defeating thoughts at first but through monitoring his own thoughts and behaviour in difficult situations, he was able to understand what was happening. He found relaxation techniques helpful but more importantly when he finally allowed himself to stand back and look at the situation objectively, he realised that he was not in a job where his talents were used to the full.

Table 1

Causes of Stress

at work

Insufficient resources and back up facilities
Poor status, pay and prospects (i.e. not feeling valued and rewarded)
Long, irregular or unsocial hours
Poor management and organisation arrangements (not being able to do your job as you feel it should be done)
Time wasted on unnecessary paperwork, meetings and form-filling
Uncertainty, insecurity (too many changes in policies, priorities, goals and objectives)
Unclear job specification
Little or no support from colleagues and managers
Feeling unable to influence decision making
Poor communication
Poor leadership

at home

Too many household chores and too little time to do them
Caring for sick or dependent relatives
Personality conflicts (e.g. partners reluctance to do share of the chores)
Conflicts of interest
Poor communication (not able to discuss important issues)
Financial problems
Troublesome neighbours
Role conflict (e.g. working mothers)

within yourself

Having unrealistically high standards (perfectionist personality)
Feeling a need to be in control of all situations
Difficulty with delegating
Not being assertive or being able to communicate your needs
Low self-esteem
Over-identification (sense of self-worth is defined by one's job)
Uncomfortable with uncertainty, ambiguity, disorganisation, risk-taking,
Feeling responsible when things go wrong

Assess Your Own Stress

Stress does not always affect people in the ways described above. It can make us cynical and disenchanted and feel that it is not worth making any effort because it seems pointless. We go through the motions of doing our daily tasks knowing we are capable of much more.

This is particularly so when we feel that:-

Others are not appreciating our efforts,
We are not clear about what we are supposed to be doing,
We feel that the goalposts are always changing or that our objectives are not clear so that we find ourselves being criticised for things which go wrong when they are not our responsibility.

We can call this organisational or environmental stress. This type of stress can be reduced by changing our response to it.

On the next few pages you will find two questionnaires, which will enable you to establish your personal stress profile. Complete these before reading the rest of the booklet as it will provide you with an insight into your own stressors as well as indicating whether or not you are at risk of the effects of stress or are already experiencing them. Some of the questions are related to the world of work - if you are not in a work environment, then adapt the question to your own situation.

The scoring system can be found at the end of the booklet.

Are you at risk?

Circle the number by the statement which best describes how you have been feeling over the past few months.

(Some of the statements apply to the world of work. If they are not relevant for you, then apply them to your own situation.)

Recently you feel that:

1. You are where you want to be at this time in your life.
almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4.
2. Your work is stimulating and interesting
almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,
3. You find it easy to switch off at the end of the day
almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,
4. You feel you have insufficient time to do your job
almost always 4, most of the time 3, some of the time 2, occasionally 2, never 0,
5. You feel satisfied with your achievements at the end of the day
almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,
6. You have someone with whom you can discuss difficult problems
almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,
7. You can accept criticism
almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,

8. You feel valued at work

almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,

9. You allow time for yourself

almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,

10. You feel rewarded at work in terms of salary, status etc.

almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,

11. If you allow some time for yourself, you feel guilty

almost always 4, most of the time 3, some of the time 2, occasionally 2, never 0,

12. Your job is the most important thing in your life

almost always 4, most of the time 3, some of the time 2, occasionally 2, never 0,

13. Your managers enable you to do your work

almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,

14. You are in a rut that you can't get out of

almost always 4, most of the time 3, some of the time 2, occasionally 2, never 0,

15. You feel part of a team

almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,

16. You are clear about what your job requires of you

almost always 0, most of the time 1, some of the time 2, occasionally 3, never 4,

- The Scoring System can be found at the end of the booklet

Are You Stressed?

Circle the number by each statement which best describes how you have been feeling over the past few weeks.

(Some of the statements apply to the world of work. If this is not relevant for you, then apply it to your own situation)

Do you feel:

1. You have a lot to look forward to

not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,

2. You are able to make decisions easily

not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,

3. You are able to rely on your memory

not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,

4. You are reasonably happy and content with your life overall

not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,

5. You have too much to do

not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,

6. You are making a useful contribution

not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,

7. You have been forgetting appointments and deadlines

not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,

8. You are full of energy
not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,
9. You are overwhelmed by your situation
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
10. You have been mislaying or losing important items at work or at home
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
11. You are refreshed on waking
not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,
12. Your alcohol intake is increasing
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
13. You are less interested in sexual activity
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
14. You are clumsy, dropping things, bumping into things
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
15. Your handwriting has changed
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
16. You have a good appetite
not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,

- 17.** You are seeing relatives and friends more often
not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,
- 18.** You are on top of things
not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,
- 19.** You have difficulty getting off to sleep
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 20.** You are let down by your colleagues
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 21.** You have been experiencing palpitations or shortness of breath
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 22.** You are enthusiastic about your work
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 23.** You have been waking early and are unable to get back to sleep
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 24.** You can unwind or switch off easily
not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,
- 25.** You are light-headed or dizzy
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,

- 26.** You have been keeping up your social activities and interests
not at all 4, occasionally 3, sometimes 2, very often 1, most of the time 0,
- 27.** You are panicky in crowded places
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 28.** You are getting irritated with people
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 29.** You are reluctant to try out new ideas and experiences
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 30.** You are unreasonably hot e.g.. without exertion
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,
- 31.** You have tightness or discomfort in your chest
not at all 0, occasionally 1, sometimes 2, very often 3, most of the time 4,

The Scoring System can be found at the end of the booklet

Table 2

Signs of Stress

Physical signs:

The physical symptoms caused by the release of adrenalin are numerous but include:-

An increase in heart rate and blood pressure causing;

palpitations, hot flushes, missed heart beats, buzzing in ears, pounding heart, faintness.

An increase in muscle tension causing;

shakiness, tremor, restlessness, muscle pain and stiffness, headache, backache, eyelid twitching.

Changes in digestive system activity leading to;

nausea, vomiting, constipation, distended abdomen, diarrhoea, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, heartburn.

Increased respiratory activity can lead to:

breathlessness, pain in chest, tight chest, dizziness, tingling, wobbly legs, lump in throat, choking feeling, blurred vision.

Other signs include;

sweating, feeling clammy, numbness of hands and feet, feeling as if you or your surroundings are unreal.
sexual problems, sleeping problems, tension, allergies, nervous rash.

Mental signs

Feeling nervous, anxious, rattled, bored, apathetic, confused, forgetful. Difficulty unwinding, loss of enthusiasm, negative thinking

Behaviour signs

Working harder but achieving less, increase in consumption of alcohol, tea coffee, cigarettes, medication, certain foods;
avoiding certain situations and people.

Stress Control - methods for controlling your stress

Now that you have completed the questionnaires and have read the previous sections of the booklet, you should have a greater understanding of stress and what it is that is causing your stress.

External causes - your stress may be due to circumstances at work or home where for example you may have too much to do or get too little co-operation from partners and colleagues. In this case you need to exercise the problem-solving skills that we all use every day on other aspects of our everyday life. In stress we are often unaware there is a problem or where or what the problem is, so we need a strategy such as the problem-solving methods described later in this booklet.

Internal causes - Sometimes the cause of stress lies within ourselves. We may hold certain beliefs that we must always be the best, that it is terrible to make a mistake, that we should like everyone or that we must be liked and respected by everyone at all times. We can call these self-defeating beliefs because they put us under a lot of unnecessary pressure. There is nothing basically wrong with these beliefs - they only become a problem when they become extreme. It is helpful to be able to identify when we are thinking these thoughts because then we are able to deal with them.

“When we are not able to bring about any change in our situation, then it is helpful if we are as strong as possible to deal with it and that we are not wasting vital energy. Relaxation techniques are helpful together with a healthy lifestyle. As we have seen, the negative effects of stress are the result of your autonomic nervous system becoming overactive. To overcome these effects you need to slow down this system. Mastering a relaxation technique such as the one on the accompanying CD is the most immediate and direct way of achieving this and should be the first step in your stress control programme”.

Table 3

Stress Controllers

Relaxation

(see section on relaxation)

Using your time more effectively

(see section on time management)

Being more assertive

Stand up for your rights

Improving your communication

Sharing concerns reduces misunderstandings and increases co-operation

Recognising your stressors

If you cannot overcome them, accept them

Identifying alternatives

Stressed people often underestimate the external resources available to them
- these include other people

Taking regular physical exercise

Burns up the excess physical energy safely. Uses up excess cholesterol released as part of the stress response

Eating well

A healthy diet and regular meals will help to counteract the effects of stress.
Reduction of intake of tea and coffee will reduce arousal and stress.
Increase intake of other non-alcoholic fluids (water, fruit juices etc)

Looking for the positive

Identify strengths as well as weaknesses in others and yourself

Deciding on a positive action

Taking action

Rapid Stress Controllers

- Take a break
- Use your relaxation exercises (Remember: be firm with hassles)
- Talk through your situation
- Decide on positive action
- Take action
- Take a break
- Use your relaxation exercises (Remember: be firm with hassles)

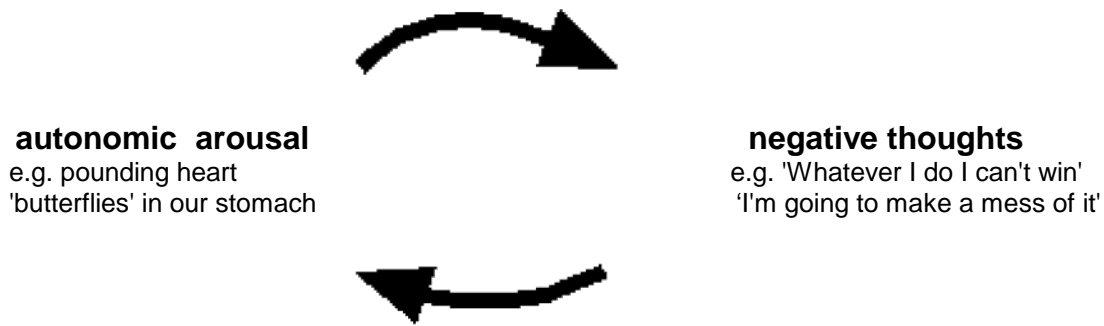
Relaxation Training

One of the major influences of medical and scientific thinking has been on the artificial separation of mind and body, with the effect that, if a medical explanation for a physical problem can not be found then it must be 'all in the mind' i.e. we are imagining the physical experience. There are many everyday examples, however, where the close connection between mind and body is recognised in everyday sayings e.g. 'she gives me a pain in the neck' or 'he makes me sick' when someone irritates us or 'I had butterflies in my stomach' when something exciting happens. 'Spineless' and 'a broken heart' are further examples of when we use physical symptoms to describe the personality of others or personal experiences.

Psychologists have long recognised the close relationship between what goes on in our mind and what happens to our body. *To control the negative effects of stress we have to reduce the activity of our autonomic nervous system.* Normally we do not have control over this part of our nervous system - as its name suggests. It is the regulator of all our basic functions such as breathing, keeping our heart beating etc., but we can learn to acquire some control by using muscular relaxation training.

It is impossible to be both stressed and relaxed at the same time.

By learning to relax our muscles we can relax our mind and body and as a result feel more in control of our lives. Increased activity in our autonomic nervous system increases negative and distorted thinking which in turn leads to further increases in autonomic activity, thereby creating a vicious circle.



We can break this vicious circle by changing the way we think about ourselves or our situation and by physically relaxing our muscles. Muscular relaxation has been tested many times in clinical trials and has been shown to be effective in reducing stress and relieving some of the physical problems that accompany it, such as raised blood pressure, digestive problems etc.

The Benefits of Relaxation Training

1. It helps self-esteem and confidence.
2. It can help to prevent the onset of stress related illnesses.
3. It can reduce sensitivity to pain.
4. By reducing the general effects of stress, it helps prevent over-reacting
5. Fatigue can be overcome more rapidly using relaxation.
6. It has been shown that relaxation can speed recovery after illness and surgery.
7. Interpersonal relationships can be improved.
High levels of stress interfere with normal thought processes and activities. In difficult situations, the relaxed person will be more effective and will have a calming effect on the other person.

This booklet accompanies an audio CD which will guide you through the relaxation programme. To get maximum benefit from the exercises you should read the following section first.

Notes on the CD Relaxation Training

1. Muscular relaxation training is a graded programme during which you will gradually speed up the relaxation process until you are able to relax and control your stress in most situations.

Part a. Takes approximately 20 minutes and enables you to recognise when you are starting to feel tense. It also helps you to contrast tension and relaxation by tensing and relaxing your muscles.

Part b. Speeds up the process and you will be concentrating on relaxing muscles.

Part c. Is a quick relaxation technique that you can use in everyday situations

2. You will need to practice at least once a day for the first three weeks or so and allow 20 minutes to complete

Parts a & b. Make sure that you are not disturbed. It is better to relax having completed the activities of the day so that you are not thinking about the things you still have to do. It is helpful to establish a regular routine for relaxation.

3. During muscular relaxation you will learn to acquire control over those parts of your body that are usually beyond your control. Just like any other skill it takes practice.

You may find it difficult at first. Some people have difficulty concentrating and find that their mind wanders off onto other things, but it will gradually become easier with practice. You will probably also find that your ability to relax varies from day to day.

It will help you to keep the words **FIRM** and **HASSLE**, used on the CD, in your mind. **FIRM** stands for “*Focus Identify Relax Muscles*”

HASSLE stands for “*Head Arms Shoulders Stomach Legs Exhale*”

4. Occasionally some people find it difficult to let go, usually because they have a fear of losing control and so feel uncomfortable when relaxing. It is helpful to remember that relaxation is an active process during which you are developing your self control skills.

5. The aim of muscular relaxation training is to acquire skills that can be used whenever required. When mastered, it is a skill which is invisible in use so you can use it in public places or meetings without other people being aware of it.

6. You may feel that you do not have the time to spend 20 minutes a day relaxing. Feeling like this only demonstrates your need to relax. Try to establish a regular routine so that you develop the habit of relaxing at the same time each day e.g. after the children have gone to bed.

7. When you are relaxing you may experience unusual sensations such as heaviness in your body, tingling sensations, sudden jerks or a feeling of floating. These are normal reactions but, if you are disturbed by them, you can reduce them by opening your eyes or by briefly tensing your muscles.
8. Sometimes people fall asleep during relaxation. This is not a good thing and should be resisted, unless you are using it specifically to help you sleep.

Coping with environmental stress - a problem-solving strategy

Locate the Problem

We may be experiencing a problem at work when the cause may be at home or vice versa. Ailsa was a newly qualified lawyer who gradually felt overwhelmed by her new job. Ultimately she was unable to face going to work at all and handed her notice in. When discussing her situation more closely, it became clear that although Ailsa's new job was stressful, she felt competent to carry out the work.

However, her flatmates were making considerable demands on her time and energy. She felt that she had to comply with them in order to be a good friend. She recognised that her needs to continue her career were as important as her friend's demands and that she needed to become more assertive.

Define the Problem

Have you got too much to do in the time available?

Do you feel that partners and colleagues are not doing their share?

Are you clear about what your goals are?

Do you feel inadequate or that people will find out that you are not as good as you think?

It is possible that there is more than one problem - try to break a large problem into smaller units. Instead of saying 'I am unhappy with my partner or boss', try to identify what specifically you are unhappy with. e.g. they do not listen or will not talk things through.

Make a List

Write down a list of your difficulties - seeing them on paper often puts them into perspective and makes the overall picture clearer. If you still have difficulty, try to think of two recent events in which you felt most stressed and one in which you felt good. What features did the stressful events have in common? - it could be that in both situations you felt powerless to influence the situation; maybe you felt you were not doing the correct thing or maybe both events involved a particular person. In the pleasant event, what was it that made you feel good? In what ways did the pleasant event differ from the unpleasant ones?

Decide What To Do

Discuss your problem with someone to get a different perspective and to obtain information. Try to think of as many ways as possible of dealing with it. You will be able to do something about some of the things on your list immediately; some will have to wait until you are in a stronger position and some you will not be able to do anything about and you will have to accept this.

Take Action Now

Do not put off doing any of those things you can do to improve your situation.

Prepare your actions carefully; think them through.
Consider any alternative courses of action and their respective advantages and disadvantages.
Identify any potential sources of support.

Assess the Outcome

Did it work? If not, why not? If it did, remember what you did and how you did it so that you can use this strategy again.

Attitude

Remember to have a positive attitude - about yourself, the situation and others involved. You are more likely to be successful if you remember that problems are a normal part of life and that most can be overcome. Problems are easier to deal with if you do so as soon as they start to develop - they are less easy to deal with if you pretend that they do not exist, expect them to go away by themselves or if you over-react to them.

Non-Verbal Stress Messages

We convey a powerful impression of ourselves to other people simply by the way we move and hold our bodies. A stressed person can often convey an impression of not being in control.

Paying some attention to our body posture can help to convey an impression of confidence and of being in control. Thinking about the way we are using our body can also reduce our stress levels directly by reducing the amount of energy we are burning up in unnecessary muscular activity.

When sitting, adopt a relaxed posture, have both feet on the floor, sit well back in the seat rather than on the edge and rest your hands in your lap. When walking, slow down, take long easy strides, let your arms move easily and lower your shoulders. Think out your actions and then approach them steadily and smoothly avoiding jerky and snatched movements.

Making Effective Use of Your Time

If you feel that you have too much to do and not enough time to do it, then perhaps you could use your time more effectively. Effective use of time means you are actually doing what you should be doing; efficient use of time means that you are using your time well. There are several good books on time management so we shall only deal with it briefly here.

A useful exercise is to keep a diary marked out in hours or half-hours, recording everything you do for a day, a week or even longer.

Although this may sound like a lot of trouble and time-consuming in itself, many people who undertake this exercise find that their ideas of how they spend their time seems quite different from how it was actually spent. This exercise can provide a great deal of information and suggest alternative ways of organising your day.

Another useful exercise is to make a list of what you have (or want) to do on a particular day or week.

Write an estimate of the time you think each item will require. Then re-arrange your list with the most important task at the top and the less important at the bottom.

Then *do one thing at a time*. Without being aware of it, we often move from one job to another before completing the first and reach the end of the day wondering where the time went to and having a collection of half-completed tasks. Don't rush from one thing to another. Allow time for regular breaks and also stop regularly to assess your progress and review your goals or method of achieving them. Most importantly, give yourself credit for your achievements.

Scoring for Questionnaires

Are you at Risk?

Add up the numbers you circled for Q1 to Q 24 to obtain your total score

0-30 Your situation is relatively free from stress

30-45 Your situation is potentially mildly stressful

45-65 You are in a stressful situation

65+ Your situation is potentially very stressful and you may need to protect yourself

Are you Stressed?

Add the numbers you circled for questions 1 to 31 to obtain your total score

0-30 You are showing no significant signs of stress, but using the relaxation CD will help to prevent stress from building up.

30-60 You are showing definite signs of stress and would benefit from using the relaxation CD and other strategies outlined in this booklet

60+ This suggests that you are suffering from stress and need to take action.

Use the relaxation CD and other strategies described in the booklet to help you cope with your stress more effectively.

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